

LA RICONDAVELLA

By: Nikhil, Hiren, and Manan

Chapter 1

My name is Jackson Stone, and I was raised by thieves since I was ten. Those thieves are my grandparents and believe me, you don't want to meet them. Anyway, I was walking home from school, and I had no homework! I know, right? It's a dream come true! I was grinning ear to ear as I ran to my house and strode over to the front door. Fortuitously, it was locked. I tried ringing the bell, and enigmatically, no one answered. My grin faded, and I slumped down on the porch, thinking that there was no way to enter. My mind was racing as I tried to think of any possible way to enter my home. While I was scanning the surroundings, something caught my eye. The window was open! Surreptitiously, I approached the fully open window to my right.

I climbed nimbly through the window frame. Eventually, I was able to bring my legs up and jumped softly onto the hardwood floor. One quick glance around told me that the house was deserted. The mess in the house meant that someone was in a hurry to leave. Realizing that my grandparents must have gone off somewhere, I started to watch TV. Something wasn't right, though. Why would my grandparents just leave in such a hurry? I brushed off the thought and continued watching.

Through the middle of my favorite show, I heard a heart-stopping scream. I panicked. My entire body shuddered, and my heart was beating as loud as a drum. I bolted out of the house, not looking back. I stopped and leaned against a brick wall. In a shaky voice, I muttered, "What was that?" It took an hour for me to calm down and be able to walk back to the house. I made sure to keep low and quiet. I didn't want to alert whatever made that scream. I scouted the perimeter and told myself it was safe. I wish I believed it. I decided not to enter, and I bet if you heard what I heard, you wouldn't either. I didn't really have any close friends, so I couldn't go to

their house. I quickly came to the conclusion that I would have to camp in the community park nearby.

I pulled myself out of my thoughts. While I was going to the park, I looked back and saw some random guy ringing my doorbell... What was weird was that four kids were ringing every doorbell on my cul de sac at once. "Go away, stalker!" I yelled. Surprisingly, I saw that they had one of those 'feed the hungry' flyers. The flyers were a startling neon yellow. They started to leave, so I screamed: "Feed the pigeons." As a prank. Laughing, I hid behind the nearest bush on my left.

Yeah, I know I shouldn't have done that, but I wasn't in the best state of mind. Anyway, why not have some fun when you want to? It was harmless enough...right?

"What's your name?" The man asked.

The man that rang my doorbell started to take his phone out. That was my call to run. Whenever someone starts taking out their phone after you prank them, that means that they're super annoying, and it means the cops are coming. Only luck could help me now. I took off and ran towards the side of a house. I peered over my shoulder before continuing to sprint. While running, I noticed a red playground on a large grass field in front of the house. I inspected the inside of the slide tower on top of the red playground and found a kid with a bright red shirt.

"Sam!" I heard someone say something distantly. I immediately recognized the voice. It was the guy from before, the one who tried to call the cops on me. I quickly ran into the small playground tower without thinking. I groaned quietly because I was stuck in the already small tower, but there was someone else inside! "Sam!" I heard it again. I started to assume that "Sam" was the kid next to me. Also, I guessed that he was the phone guy's son or nephew or something like that. I heard a knock on the side door of the tower. It was followed by the phone guy asking, "Sam, are you there?" Unlike the way into the tower, the way out was only a slide. On the way in, there is a group of monkey bars, which allows an easier exit into this cramped tower. I couldn't go back out that way, because the man could've easily seen me. However, this playground was meant for little kids, so the slide exit was a small one. I was desperate for a solution, then, I saw a hole in the roof. It was probably meant as some kind of lookout hole or something like that. It was just big enough for me to fit in. Using the small crevices in the walls, I

could probably manage to get out. The plan was slowly forming in my mind. However, the idea was a venture since I could easily be seen.

"Sam!" The man shouted angrily once again. This time, he sounded more worried than humorous. I got up against the curved wall on my right. I hastily worked my way to a crevice in the wall near the lookout hole. Putting one foot after the other, I got up just enough that I could peer out of the tunnel. The mulch was turning into a chocolate brown color. It was definitely wet. I heard rain tapping on the roof of the structure. I took a deep breath and heaved myself up. I was just high enough that I could bring my legs up. I sat on the wall, alert. I scanned the landscape, checking if the man was around here. As I turned my head, I could see that the man was on the opposite side of the playground. I let my legs pull me down as I slid off the slippery window. I braced my knees for impact. Really, the drop was only around seven feet, but I braced my knees as if I were jumping off of a cliff. I landed softly on my feet and immediately started running.

As I was running, I quickly looked back at the playground. The kid named Sam walked out of the main entrance on the opposite side, where his dad was and uttered something to him. Suddenly, he pointed to me, and I immediately knew what was happening. I hastily whipped around and bolted as fast as my legs would let me.

I started running, but the truth was, I didn't know where to go. I had never really explored my neighborhood when I was younger. The only street I actually knew by heart was my own. Not knowing where to go, I chose a random road on my left and ran.

I bumped into someone who I didn't see in my haste to run away. He hollered angrily, "Watch where you're going, kid!" I decided to leave the scene quickly, so I made a break for it. After a couple more turns and twists, I found myself hopelessly lost. I knew my community was more prominent than most neighborhoods, but I never anticipated to be this lost. I walked around, trying to find one I recognized, but no avail.

While rushing through the neighborhood, I ran into somebody.

"YO, watch where you are going, dude," A boy around the same age as I said. He was average height for a 14-year-old kid and had black hair. The kid was wearing a yellow sweatshirt with a dragon design on it. He had a bright yellow band around his arm. I guess he likes yellow. He suspiciously looked me

up and down. "Do you live around here?" the boy asked as he narrowed his eyes.

"No," I lied. "I'm just visiting family," I said while trying to think of a way out of this conversation. I should've kept running before. Still, I was already in the discussion, so I might as well get it over with. I scanned the area around me for hopes of making some excuse. The area around me was mostly yellowish grass, other than the sidewalk I was standing on. On my left was a street, past it, a mailbox. Something clicked in my head. "I live right there," I said while pointing to the house across the street on my left.

"Wait, you live there?" He asked, "I thought you were just visiting family?" I hesitated. How could I be so stupid? I quickly corrected myself. "I am. They live there," I casually remarked. I really didn't know who lived there. I just hoped that they could understand my situation. I would have to tell them the truth eventually. Hopefully, not for some time.

"Ok," He said. I detected humor in his voice as if he knew something I didn't. "I'm gonna go now," He said.

"Sure," I responded. I ran past him on the sidewalk. I looked back, and I found that the kid was standing there, looking in my direction, and then again at the house I pointed to. He shrugged and ran away from me. I started to run, as well. I kept on running on the street until I reached a dead end. On my watch, the time was 5:30, which was weird because it should have been dark out. It was the middle of winter. I didn't feel cold, it felt like it was sixty degrees out. Probably global warming.

Or, as the weatherman said, "Not global warming; global changes." I really don't know the difference if the changes are global warming. Anyway, I walked over to the last house on the cul de sac. The house was made of reddish-brown brick, and the front lawn had an attractive fountain made of sleek marble. The front door was made of glass. The house looked modern with the amount of glass and the color white. I looked behind the house, but I couldn't see much. I walked onto the damp-green lawn. My sneakers sank into the grass. I stepped into the gap between the houses. I tried to look behind the house again. This time I saw a forest, with tall pine trees and pine needles littering the forest floor. At that moment I made a decision: I wasn't going home. Nothing was waiting for me there anymore.

I walked past the deck and patio of the house. I didn't know where I was going. All I knew was that I wasn't going home.

Chapter 2

Really, that dramatic ending was uncalled for, but it seemed right. I mean, I just decided to run away from home. That seems like a substantial decision. I don't know why I decided to venture into the forest, but it seemed like the forest called me. I just had a sudden urge to go in there...

Okay, so anyway, I walked into the vast forest. The trees were mostly pine, with stubs lining the bark. It didn't seem like there was any poison oak or any plant that seemed poisonous for that matter. I could easily fashion a shelter from the things I found on the ground. There were many logs, just big enough so that it worked for a hostel. Also, the pine needles could be used as twine to make a rope that could tie the logs together. I decided to walk deeper into the forest.

As I walked further into the forest, I found that there was a small pond, around 20 feet across. However, the water was muddy, unfit to drink. There was also algae on the surface of the lake, and the bank was littered with plastic. Unless I wanted the coronavirus or any other life-threatening sickness, I'd better not drink the water. Even if I was desperate, the water would be a one-way trip to death. I saw more plants, this time there were shrubs. The leaves could be used as a rainproof part of my shelter. I decided to walk past the pond and into the more dense part of the forest. As I walked through, I began scanning my surroundings for anything that could be a shelter for me tonight. It was still bright, probably around 4:00 (I'm pretty sure my watch is broken). However, winter here could bring sunset around 5:30, so I'd better start building with whatever I had around me.

I made a stack of wood I gathered from peeling bark. There was a lot of the material on the old oak trees and logs. I started to try and construct a makeshift tent. Once I assembled a temporary shelter, I looked at it carefully to see if it could survive the night, even if it rained. There wasn't any rain-proofing. I thought that the leaves could possibly be rainproof and a vital tool for my shelter. I was horribly wrong.

I gathered leaves and piled them onto the sides of the shelter. The leaves were small, and rain fell through the holes in my tent. These leaves did not work at all, and rain seeped through the leaves and onto me all night long. It was tough to sleep on the muddy ground.

The makeshift shelter somehow survived the night, and in the morning, I woke up to the birds chirping and the trees were dancing in the wind. My shirt and pants were soaked with muck from the rain yesterday. After cleaning myself up the best I could, I crawled through the small entryway I created.

The forest was bright and sunny, and there was a light breeze coming from my right. I looked in that direction and saw a yellow band on the ground next to a large pine. That was unusual.

Gazing at it, I wondered what to do. After thinking, I decided to explore the forest some more. As I began to walk, a drift of cold wind brushed across my shoulder. It seemed like the pines on the forest floor were piling higher for every minute I walked.

It dawned on me that I desperately needed water. Since the polluted pond had no fresh water, I decided to go deeper into the forest some more to look for other water sources. As I walked, I came across a small river. By the river, I mean like a tiny stream. There wasn't nearly enough water to sustain me, so I decided to follow the stream, hoping that it could lead me to a larger body of water. To me, this was a logical conclusion, since the stream had to flow somewhere. As I walked on the riverbank, I found that many plants grew on the banks.

I made a mental note to myself to get food from this area. I looked through the bushes and found a berry bush. I know this sounds stupid, but I took a large handful of berries and shoved them into my mouth. I didn't realize I was starving until I saw the berries. Then I realized how stupid that was. Those berries I was eating weren't washed. I could have washed them using the water from the stream. At the least, I should have known what type of berries they were. Many wild berries are poisonous and can make you sick. Those berries could be one of those types of berries, and I ate them without even checking. It's too late now, so I guess I should keep on going. I followed the trail for around fifteen minutes. On my watch, it said the time was 9:30.

"Whoa," I slowly said. In front of me was a massive lake. The water was sparkling blue. I had a sudden desire to swim in it. I've always liked swimming, but I was muddy and covered in filth. I realized that it probably wasn't a good idea since this would be my only water source. I slowly dipped my hands into the water. It was perfect. I lifted my hands in the air, making sure that no water seeped through my hands. I took a sip of the freshwater. I received multiple sips of the water. The water was terrific, maybe because of the lake or perhaps because I had not had it all week. Since I found a clean water source, I thought I might as well spend the night here. I set up camp the exact same way as I had the night before. I mean, what are the chances of it raining two days in a row?

I was wrong.

Chapter 3

Once again, there was a massive downpour. The rain pounded my lean-to like cannonballs. In desperation, I flung a large leaf over my head to get at least some protection from the rain. Before long, both my shelter and my clothes were drenched. I was really starting to get frustrated about the rain's downpour schedule. Deciding that lying down and getting soaked was pointless, I slipped out of my lean-to only to receive a blast of cold wind that threw me back into the shelter.

Grumbling with irritation, I once again slipped out of my lean-to. It was still dark, and the clouds were murky gray. Sitting down on the grass, I pondered what to do. I decided to first drink some clean water from the lake. As I started to walk, more gales of wind pounded against my body, but I managed to steady myself.

After I had gotten water from the lake, I walked back to camp. On the way there, I overheard a conversation.

"He's an idiot," one man said. His voice was gruff, rocky, and sincere. It sounded like an earthquake embodied.

"Obviously, but would he do that?" whined a high pitched voice.

"Quit your whining!" barked the deep-voiced man.

"Do you really want them to hear what we're talking about?"

"No, sir!" squeaked the high pitched voice, and that was the end of the conversation. I wanted to know more, but I realized that following those men probably wouldn't be a good idea. I decided to head to the lake as planned.

As I continued to walk to the lake, I puzzled over what the gruff-voiced man had said. Deep in my thoughts, I didn't realize I got to the lake until I felt the rough sand and mud on the bank. I masterfully dipped my bucket in the water and turned it sideways slowly. This was a technique I learned from a survival camp that eliminated any excess fluid. Satisfied with my work, I wheeled around and headed in the direction of my shelter.

I still couldn't shake off what those men said. The deeper voiced man sounded like a leader because the other man (or kid) trembled with fear. Another question I had was, 'What were they planning to do?'. They might be an organization that helps the public, or maybe they could be one that harms society. They could be spies. I also couldn't help but wonder who they were talking about. Why were they even this deep in the woods? Wait... Maybe they're not deep in the woods... Perhaps I've reached the other end of the forest...

Filled with hope, I decided to test if my theory was right. But first, I had to get to my shelter. When I reached the windy climate near my lean-to, I started walking in the direction that would make me go against the least amount of wind. When I reached the shelter, I drank a few sips of water and started packing necessary equipment for my research, including a compass, food, water, and a map. Deciding that it was logical to go back to the place the men spoke, I gathered my packed gear and hustled to the lakeside area. When I reached the lake, something caught my eye. Human footprints were leading past the lake. Whoever it was, they were going north into the area I thought was the end of the lush forest.

Excited, I followed the man's footprints into what appeared like a beautiful garden with many flowers, vines, and bushes. The grove had a spectacular fountain that was carefully placed in the middle of the garden. There was a rusted sign with words carved into the plaque. It read, "Welcome to Oak

Forest's magnificent botanical garden." There was also another sign that told campers that they were entering the forest. After quickly scanning the area, I noticed a log cabin near the east side of the grove. It struck me that whoever lived there was the caretaker of the woods. I wondered if I should ask the person for directions. He/she would also probably tell me where I was now! Deciding that this was the best possible path, I walked to the old cabin. I was skeptical. Would whoever live here actually tell me anything? Or was nobody home?

When I knocked on the door, no one answered. The door was dark oak, not light brown like the rest of the cabin. I knocked again. Suddenly, the door was flung open.

"What are you doing here!" a man the size of a large bear demanded. I jumped back, startled by his voice. The man had dark brown hair, and his voice was as deep as a deep ocean. He was wearing a blood-red plaid shirt. His moon-gray cap had an NFL logo on it. When he saw my gear, I could tell that he knew what was going on. "Oh, I see," he said. "Come on in." The large man opened the door and ushered me into the cabin. The man sat me down. He walked away into a different room and brought a sandwich back.

I stared at the food and realized that it had been days since I last ate. I wanted to take a large bite out of the sandwich, but I didn't trust the man yet.

Apparently, I didn't hide the fact that I was reluctant to eat the sandwich because the man asked why I wasn't eating.

"I just ate," I lied. Unfortunately, the man could tell I was lying by my disheveled appearance. "Please, I insist. You must be very hungry," he said in a kind tone.

"Ok," I responded. I carefully picked up the sandwich and nibbled at the crust of the sandwich. Then, I took a humongous bite. I'd never tasted anything so good in my life. It probably wasn't even that good, but it had been days since I last ate, and the sandwich seemed to taste perfect.

I was about to take another bite when I heard footsteps upstairs. I quickly swiveled my head from left to right. The sound startled me.

"Who's there?" I yelled. I stood up and locked my eyes on the man. He stared right back at me. I took a shaky step away from the man.

"Uncle, I'm going to leave now." A familiar voice called down from upstairs. I heard footsteps getting closer and closer. He was coming down the stairs.

My body tensed. Who is it going to be? Would it be those men from the forest? Or worse... Would it be some random serial killer and I was his next target. No... I'd heard that voice before, but I couldn't remember where. As the boy came into my vision, I was astonished. He was the boy with the dragon sweatshirt I had seen before. He still had those neon yellow wristbands and a yellow headband. Except for one thing on his left hand. He had lost his other neon yellow wristband.

Chapter 4

"What are you doing here?" the kid inquired.

"You recognize this boy?" the man asked.

"I ran into him a few days ago in the neighborhood," the kid replied.

"I see," the man said. "Oh, I forgot to ask. What's your name?"

I wondered if I should tell him my real name. The man was kind, and I appreciated him taking me in, but I didn't know if I could trust him yet. My best option right now was to act incognito. "I'm James," I lied.

"What happened to you?" the kid asked, motioning to my dirty clothes. "How did you get all the way out here?" I wondered if I should tell him the truth. I mean, what harm could it do? Still, they would ask why I went into the forest in the first place...Anyway, I decided to tell him the truth about what happened in the woods.

"I was walking through the forest, and I saw this big man. There was a smaller man beside him with a high pitched voice. It sounded like they were planning something. They were also talking about a third man. After they left, I came up to this area. I wanted to know what this place was, so I knocked on the door. That brings me here." I finished.

There was a moment of hushed silence after my speech. The silence was broken by the kid, saying, "Wow, what a mystery" in a mocking tone.

"Hey, you asked for the truth, and that's what I gave you," I responded.

"Anyway, do you guys have any idea who those people were or if there is anything nearby that those men would've wanted?" The kid shook his head, and the old man gave me a thoughtful stare. He did this as if he was contemplating whether to tell me. Or maybe he was deciding whether he knew or not.

"Well, there is that hotel... but you shouldn't worry about that." He said this in a suspicious tone as if he was testing me. He wanted me to ask about it, I quickly realized.

"Tell me more," I remarked. I wasn't sure about this, but I was convinced that if I played this outright, I could get exactly what I wanted from it. This sounded like a story I had heard when I was a child, the evil demon luring his prey into a trap. Yet I knew I had it right. That man knew something, and he would spill the information like a tipped-over glass of wine. It would stain anything it touched, and so this information would stain us.

"Okay, where should I start? Well, I guess I should start from the beginning. So, when I was growing up, I came across this hotel. It had silver tinted windows and brick exterior walls. When I went there, there were a bunch of kids there. They claimed they saw men with large bags walking out of the hotel. They joked around that those were bodies, but claimed that whatever those men were carrying, it had to be heavy. They said the men

carried it like it was heavy, hunched down, with the bags on their backs. When I was older, I went back to the hotel. It became much more advanced in security, with security cameras guarding every window and open steel doors in case of a breach. I felt like something happened there; something massive." He paused, taking in a breath. "Anyway, that's all I know, but I can bet you that the hotel has more secrets than there are fish in the ocean." He said this with absolute certainty.

"Where is this hotel anyway?" I asked.

There was a moment of stunned silence in the room. After a while, the man answered.

"I think it's somewhere in the city of Ricovilla, a town just east of here."

After digesting what he said, I stood up.

The kid finally spoke. "I want to go."

Chapter 5

I looked at him, "My name is Lucas Williams. I definitely want to go there. I mean, it sounds pretty interesting....right?" He said while looking at me.

"I'll go too," I casually remarked. "If this Ricovilla place has anything important that gives us a clue of what those guys are doing, shouldn't we go? Plus, I could tell those guys were up to something." I looked at the man to see if he approved of what Lucas and I were doing. To my surprise, the man seemed pleased, as if he wanted us to find out more about La Ricondavella.

"I was hoping that you two would use your survival skills to find out more about the strange men at Ricovilla. For nearly a decade, people have been scared to even go near La Ricondavella, thinking that it had some special power or that a mysterious presence haunted it. Citizens have tried to find out if the theory was true, but for now, we have found out that nothing is strange about the hotel..."

"For now?" I asked. Did he mean that they weren't sure? The man looked as if he didn't want to talk about the topic.

"Nothing dark or shady has been found," the man assured me. "There were only rumors about an illegal activity happening there." He said this confidently. Or at least he sounded confident. Lucas looked at the man and spoke up.

"Are you coming with us?" he asked the man.

The man shook his head. "Unfortunately, I have a business to attend to. I wish you two the best of luck in whatever you choose to do."

There was suddenly a somber mood in the cabin. The man got up and addressed Lucas and me. "I suggest you both get ready for the journey," he said. "Bring anything you can carry, but nothing more. It will be a long trip." That was the end of the discussion. The man (who hadn't mentioned his name yet) gave me a bag full of food, gear, equipment, water, clothes, shoes, and first aid. The man assured me it weighed around 35 pounds, but it still felt like 50. I couldn't imagine lugging the bag around during the trip. It didn't help that I have never been hiking or backpacking before. Luckily, Lucas got a knapsack full of water. I felt sure that it would run out quickly, but I didn't mention it. Lucas told me that it was best to change out of my tarnished clothes and wear the new ones that the man was supplying. He pointed towards a door and told me to turn in there. I walked over to the door, and it creaked open. There was a bathroom on the other side of the door. I walked into the room and closed the door behind. After locking it, I changed into my fresh clothes. The clothes were a little baggy, but anything that wasn't filthy was okay for me.

I looked in the mirror, and for the first time, I realized how dirty my face looked. I washed my face with the water from the sink and walked out of the restroom. I took a deep breath. The reality of what we were doing finally set in. We were going to a mysterious town that has dangerous men within it. This mission was totally unprecedented. Still, something pushed me to go there, no matter what would come.

Chapter 6

"James, come here," The man called out.

"Ummmmm...", I replied. " It's actually Jackson. I'm sorry, but I didn't trust you at first, so I gave you a fake name."

"Well, it's fine. I won't hold it against you, and it is always good to be careful. Anyway...Jackson, can you come over here?"

" I've seen your face somewhere, or at least someone with your facial features. Do you know any family?..... Or are you an orphan?" He said this softly as if trying to make me feel better if I was an orphan.

" Yup, I'm an orphan." I lied again.

The man sighed. "Jackson, I want you to know something. I really don't know what your motivation is for going to La Ricondavella, but I'll tell you what my nephew's motivation is. I was a hotel manager, the one for La ricondavella, at least 30 years ago. I was robbed blind by highly intelligent robbers...." He paused.

"If you were gonna ask what I have to rob, I had the loot of the entire town's treasury in there. They didn't even leave me a penny. All I found when I checked on the vault was a hat. Lucas thinks he can get revenge on the robbers if he buffs up La ricondavella's defenses." He stopped.

" Ok," I responded. "When are we going to leave?"

STORYLINE:

Jackson Stone has been on the run for a while. When he finally finds a home with his grandparents, they mysteriously disappear. He sets out for answers but runs into mysterious men instead. A man in a log cabin sets Jackson's sights on La Ricondavella, a strange hotel. Will La ricondavella be the answer to Jackson? Or will the true mystery lay unseen....

Jackson Stone...He sets his sights on La ricondavella, where his grandparents robbed in their early years. His grandparents are planning another robbery when Jackson comes along, and it's up to Jackson to stop them. However, this isn't known to the reader until the middle of the book.